

**Title:** Beach Reads: WHY? With Friends Like These

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Job 4:1-8](#)

**Text:** [Job 23:1-10](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



We went to the beach last week and if you were at the beach, or the lake, or just out of pocket for whatever reason, you are behind. We started our annual Bible beach reads series. Each summer, we look at narratives in the Bible that are like summer bestsellers. This year, our story is the Book of Job, a harder read than previous summers because it

deals with one of the true mysteries of life. Let's do a quick review and help people catch up.

Job is probably the oldest story in the Bible. Many scholars believe that it was told orally around the campfire centuries before it was written down around 2,500 years ago. It reads like a play and you are the audience. An unknown author is addressing the question, "If God is all-good and all-powerful, why do terrible things happen?" Why? It's one of life's biggest questions. Why do bad things happen to good people?

This is the big takeaway from last week. The author isn't writing history. He is writing theology, writing about the big "why?" Someone this week said, "So the author of Book of Job would say that God caused that mother and her two children to die in that terrible accident on I465?" No, I said, "He is trying to say just the opposite." He's *not* trying to prove that life is fair, that you get what you deserve, that God rewards the righteous and punishes the evil.

Rather, he is saying that life is *not* fair, and that sometimes the best people we know suffer terribly. This will become crystal clear this week.

To address this issue, he asks "Who is the best person I know and what's the worst that could happen?" He had an answer. The best person anyone knew was Job. Everybody knew this, even God. Job was so good that God brags not once but twice about him. "There was "no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1: 8b, 2:3b)

God makes this claim about Job when the heavenly court is in session. You may not think about heaven as a courtroom but the author of Job does and many of the ancient prophet did as well. The chief prosecutor working for God in His courtroom is Satan. Satan challenges God's claim and garners permission to put Job to the test. So in the first act of the play, Job, as the best person anyone knew, had the worst thing happen to him.

Satan decided that the worst thing that could happen to the best person was to take everything away from him. In one terrible day, his oxen and donkeys were stolen by the Sabeans and his servants killed. Then, Job's sheep were struck by lightning and those servants killed. Then, the Chaldeans stole all of the camels and killed all of those servants. To top it all off, all of his sons and daughter were killed in a tornado. Four disasters in a matter of hours, in one day. This was Satan's answer to what the worst thing that can happen to the best person you know. Job's response was unbelievable. He tears his robe, shaves his head, falls down and worships God. He said, "...blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing." (Job 1:22)

Satan tries again to turn Job against God, afflicting him with sores all over his body. The itching was so unbearable that Job took a piece of broken pottery, found a pile of ashes outside his home and scrapes himself, seeking relief from his misery. To add to his pain and suffering, Job's wife comes to him and says, "You and your integrity are pathetic. Just curse God, and die."

A remarkable thing happens. Three of Job's friends show up and they do what friends need to do in such a tragic time. They sit with him for a full week without saying a thing. They couldn't understand why bad things happen to good people and even if they could, it wouldn't take away the pain or the grief. They simply sit with him. To sit with someone who is suffering, simply sit and share in that person's pain, is often the best thing any of us can do.

That's where we left Job last week, the end of act one. The review is over. Now on to new material.

Act two opens with the same scene, Job and his three friends, sitting in silence. The silence is broken by Job with the word, Why?

"Why didn't I die at birth? Why didn't I die when I came out of the womb?" (Job 3:11)

"Why did I have a mother to receive me and breasts to nurse me?" (Job 3.12)

"Why wasn't I stillborn and buried with all the babies who never saw light?" (Job 3.16)

"Why bother keeping bitter people alive?" (Job 3:20)

"Why is life given to a man whose future is hidden, whom God has fenced in?" (Job 3. 23)

Job is really asking is this: "Why did God allow this to happen to me?" Can you blame him? When bad things happen, we want to know "why?" Unfortunately, when Job breaks the silence, his friends see this as their opportunity to tell him why bad things happen to good people. This is essentially what they say. They don't. Bad things don't happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. And in order to deserve all the calamity that has fallen upon him, Job must have done something very bad.

This is where it helps to think of Job as a play. You are watching all of this unfold. You've seen everything that's happened on the stage. You know that Job hasn't suffered this calamity because he's done something bad. You know that it was the result of a conversation between God and Satan, and the effect of knowing it is powerful. It's called "dramatic irony," and it happens when the characters in a play say something you know isn't true. It makes you feel superior to those characters, smarter than them. You know something they don't know, and even if you would have agreed with them before, even if you would have said that bad things only happen to bad people, now you don't, because now you know that sometimes bad things happen to good people, even to very good people. <sup>1</sup>

But while you sit there in your seat, knowing the truth, down there on the stage Job's friends keep insisting that he must have done something wrong. They go on, chapter after chapter, condemning their friend with some of the most eloquent poetry ever written:

Eliphaz starts, "Would you mind if I said something to you? Under the circumstances it's hard to keep quiet." (Job 4:1) I've had a revelation and this is what I must say. "Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it" (Job 4:7-8)

You hear what he is saying. "You've brought this on yourself; you've reaped what you have sown. Everybody knows you are responsible for the situation you now find yourself in.

Then, his next friend, Bildad starts in with the same and even more. He says, "Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?" (Job 8:3 Of course God doesn't pervert justice! But Bildad believes Job is suffering is because God is enforcing justice. God is punishing him. To suggest otherwise is to impugn God's integrity. "See, God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers." (Job 8:20)

It never occurs to Bildad that there is any other explanation to Job's predicament. Suffering is always the result of God's punitive displeasure." But he does offer Job suggestion. Confess. "...if you will seek God surely he will rouse himself and restore you." (Job 8:6)

And when Job tries to defend his innocence, his third friend Zophar, steps in and says, " Job, you say "My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight. But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you....he knows those who are worthless; when he sees sin..." (Job 11:4-5, 11)

Everything is very simple for Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Life is always explainable in terms of merit and reward. Sin is always punished and it is therefore possible, when seeing suffering to know that there was a cause, a transgression, a clear indication of sin. They were far better friends when they were silent. Now, with friends like these, Job can't help but feel despair.

Finally, he has enough of them and says so. "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit? Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?" (Job 16:2-3) Can you blame him?

Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do? Do you know how that feels? If you do, then you know how Job feels. His friends are telling him that he's a sinner, that he needs to repent, and yet he knows that he has done nothing wrong. But here's the problem: his friends believe that life is fair, that if you are prospering it's because of your righteousness and if you are suffering it's because of your wickedness. Bad people are punished; good people blessed.

Job, on the other hand, has learned that in his case, life is not fair, and that is one of the most important messages of this book. It's one some of us are still trying to learn, one the ancient author of the Book of Job was

demonstrating in Act 2 of this ancient play. The audience knows. We know the truth. All of this wasn't punishment for sin but is rather the worst thing that could happen to the best person everybody knows.

Satan may not have managed to get Job to curse God, but he has managed, with friends like these, to deceive Job about who God is. He has made God out to be distant, uncaring, unmoved, even uninvolved. There is nothing in the world quite like the feeling of being all alone, without a comforter to help, to understand.

So on that pile of ashes, he prays, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me." (Job 23:2-3) He thinks if he can find God, he will discover the answer to "why?"

But for Job, God has gone missing. "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." (Job 23:8-9) Have you ever gone looking for God and found nothing? Have you demanded answers from God and received only silence?

One thing is for sure: there is no sense of absence where there has been no sense of presence. Job had experienced God's presence. This is what makes Job hurt even more, the memory of what used to be there is no longer there. You cannot miss what you have never known, which makes a sense of absence, especially God's absence--the very best proof that we knew God once, and that we may know God again. There is loss in absence, but there is also hope, because what happened once can happen again, and only an empty cup can be filled."<sup>2</sup>

Only an empty cup can be filled. That's the word of hope for us from this second act of Job. You can experience that which you once had. What happened once is about to happen again to Job. <sup>3</sup> He is an empty cup ready to be filled. He is a desperate man, but in his desperation, he is finally ready to discover God again which comes in Act 3.

---

<sup>1</sup> Somerville, Jim. Back Roads of the Bible. Richmond, VA. October 14, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. Modified from "The Day We Were Left Behind", Christianity Today, May 18, 1998, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan, King. "An Empty Cup." Retrieved by subscription at sermons.com.